What is Introspective Digital Archaeology?

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Introspective Digital Archaeology seeks to examine the ways in which digital technologies within archaeology may have changed what we do, how we do it, how we represent what we do, how we communicate what we do, how we understand what we do, and how others understand what we do. This is in contrast to the more traditional approach, in which archaeological perspectives of digital technologies tend to cluster around the context of application, accounting for and justifying the use of a particular digital methodology in a specific circumstance. An introspective approach to Digital Archaeology represents a much wider and more fundamental approach to the understanding of the digital transformation of archaeology and considers the intermediation of digital technologies at every stage of the production of archaeological knowledge.

Introspective Digital Archaeology, therefore, seeks to understand the nature of the computational turn in archaeology and its effect on every stage of knowledge creation – from the theories we develop and use to the recognition of archaeological features on and in the ground, from the definition and capture of archaeological data through to the methods of structuring and recording those data, from their manipulation and analysis through to the presentation and synthesis of those data, and, ultimately, through to the construction, management, and publication of the resultant knowledge. This introspective or more self-aware Digital Archaeology consciously seeks to understand the underlying processes and behaviours that sit behind the tools, technologies, and methodologies applied. In some respects, it is not dissimilar to the kind of digital introspection commonly applied to the examination of the state and behaviour of software at runtime, whether it is monitoring virtual machines, examining processes, tracing tasks performed by agents, etc., but it goes much further in that the emphasis is not simply on looking beneath the surfaces, at processes and functions, but considers the larger picture: not just the context of application but the implications of that application in the first place. Taken to an extreme, introspection can lead to the reverse of what is intended – self-awareness can lead to a level of self-consciousness such that actions become frozen by indecision. That might appear to be a risk, but in the light of the risks of not adopting a more introspective mode – a somewhat naive, technocentric, consumer-oriented, technological determinism – it is arguably one worth taking. Introspection may also appear to imply an undue focus on the adverse effects of digital technologies, to be anti-technological in some sense, but that is certainly not the intention here – the objective is to gain a greater understanding and appreciation of these technologies within their disciplinary context, and in the process advance the exercise of Digital Archaeology.

As Samuel Florman observed in his preface to *The Introspective Engineer*,

> “We begin with introspection. But the implicit conviction … is that thought will lead to action.” (1997, xii).